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United States Senate

SELECT COMMITTEE TO
STUDY GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS WITH
RESPECT TO INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES

(PURSUANT TO S. RES. 21, 94TH CONGRESS)

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

January 30, 1976

The Honorable John Glenn
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator Glenn:

I have reflected on the question you asked me during the hearing held by the Government Operations Committee on January 21, concerning the desirability of establishing a Senate Committee to oversee the intelligence functions of the Government. I think it would be helpful if I put down my thoughts in this letter.

You asked what the ideal situation would be. Upon considered reflection, I am of the view that an oversight committee for each House would serve best to address the serious problems that have been raised over the last 30 years concerning secret intelligence activities of the U.S. Government. I am in agreement with those that maintain that the present situation whereby six committees of the Congress exercise some degree of oversight over covert operations is not a workable arrangement. It is a situation that verges upon the chaotic. Clearly, one committee for each House would be a far better solution than the three in each House that presently are involved in monitoring the covert action programs of the United States.

I support the proposal for an oversight committee for each House, because it is clear that the two Houses function in very different ways. The differences are many -- some are a result of traditions of long duration. Other differences are accounted for in part by the size and character of electoral districts, length of service between elections, and, of course, the respective members of the two bodies.

One of the important aspects of the oversight proposal (S. 2893) now before your Committee that I have introduced with seven other colleagues on the Senate Select Committee, is a reporting requirement contained in Section VI. The oversight committee would have the obligation to alert committees of the Senate of information concerning intelligence activities in areas that might be of relevance to those committees. If this duty was carried out well, some of the main causes that have contributed to the proliferation of committees involved in monitoring intelligence activities would disappear.

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In my view, the issues that have generated so much emotion over the last year or so will gradually lessen. In a time of consensus, oversight committees would function effectively without much fanfare or controversy. It is in a time of consensus, when oversight tends to become lax, that checks and balances are particularly desirable. The advantages of checks and balances built into the bicameral structure of our Legislature by the Constitution, of course, have merit in time of controversy, as the history of the last ten years so well shows.

If the responsibility for monitoring of highly sensitive operations is reduced to one committee in either House, it seems to me that it would be not only desirable, but necessary to assure that the perspectives of the two chambers are strongly represented by separate committees. In the past thirty years, secret wars have been waged, vast sums transferred to other governments without Congressional awareness and a host of illegal acts committed. In view of this past history of the lack of adequate Congressional oversight, it seems to me unwise to concentrate oversight in only one committee for the Congress as a whole. Further, it is my view that it is not only constitutionally appropriate, and in the best interest of the nation's security to have a committee for each body given the full powers required for effective oversight. A necessary requirement whether for two separate committees or a joint committee is that they must function under agreed upon procedures which would assure that valid national secrets are protected. There might be occasions when, for security reasons, or some other important purpose, the committees of both Houses might choose to meet together in order to reduce risk or to facilitate action. Such joint meetings between separate committees could easily be provided for.

In sum, it is my view that the advantages of separate committees for the Senate and House to oversee intelligence activities outweigh the possible advantages in limiting the chances for disclosure that might be derived by a single joint committee. I would welcome discussing this with you at your convenience.

With kind regards,

Sincerely,

Frank Church

cc: Senator Abraham A. Ribicoff, Chairman
Senator John L. McClellan
Senator Henry M. Jackson
Senator Edmund S. Muskie
Senator Lee Metcalf
Senator James B. Allen
Senator Lawton Chiles
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